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Public Works Department

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January 25, 2000

ORIGINAL

Docket Management System
U.S. Department of Transportation
Room PL – 401
400 Seventh Street, S.W.
Washington D.C 20590-0001

Dear Ladies & Gentlemen:

Re: Docket No. FRA-1999-6439, Notice No. 1 – 52

On behalf of the City of Ames, I strongly urge that the final rulemalting on the Use of Locomotive Horns at Highway-Rail Grade Crossings include the "wayside" automated train horn as a supplemental safety measure. Our community has installed three of these "wayside" automated train horns in an attempt to mitigate train horn noise without compromising the safety of our residents. These have been installed at the Hazel Avenue, Scholl Road, and North Dakota crossings since October 1998, and it has tremendously improved the quality of life and safety for our residents.

These wayside automated train horns should be included as a supplemental safety measure since they are a proven safety device. Before we tried the automated train horns, we investigated the experience of other communities (i.e. Gering, Nebraska and Parsons, Kansas) where the systems had been installed for several years. Through our investigation, we discovered that these "wayside" automated train horns had accomplished their community's goals by improving the audible warning at the crossing while mitigating the train horn noise in the immediate residential area. Furthermore, we were convinced by the Volpe Center's study entitled "Field Evaluation of a Wayside Horn at a Highway-Railroad Grade Crossing" that the wayside horn did not increase the driver's risk at a crossing in comparison with the use of the train horns. In fact, the report indicates that the gate violations had decrease by over 50% after the wayside automated train horns were installed. It should be noted that we not only conducted phone interviews with various city and business officials in Parsons, Kansas and Gering, Nebraska, but also visited the Parsons community to evaluate firsthand the effectiveness of the train horn's operation.

The inclusion of the wayside automated train horns would both benefit communities and achieve the safety levels that are being sought at crossings. This is proven in our joint study with the Iowa Department of Transportation to determine the effectiveness of the device. This published study entitled "Evaluation of an Automated Horn Warning System at Three Highway-Railroad Grade Crossings in Ames, Iowa" had a twofold purpose: 1) determine the overall effectiveness of the wayside automated train horns in reducing the annoyance level for nearby residents; and 2) determine the overall safety at the crossings with the wayside automated train horns. As indicated in the report, the responses from residents surveyed were overwhelmingly positive and supportive of the device. This study also concluded that 78% of the motorists preferred the wayside automated train horn system and 92% of the train engineers rated the overall safety of the wayside automated train horns about the same or safer than train mounted horns. The results of the study were so overwhelmingly positive that the City is facilitating the installation of three more wayside automated train horn systems at the Kellogg Avenue, Clark Avenue, and Duff Avenue crossings in our central business district.

We also strongly urge you to include the "wayside" automated train horns as a supplementary device because the use of the other supplementary safety devices will not practically work at most of our grade crossings. According to the proposed rulemalting, the supplementary safety measures that would allow for the elimination of train horns would include the four-quadrant gates, the closure of the grade crossing, one-way streets with gates, raised medians, and photo enforcement. Temporary closures at night or one-way streets with gates are not practical since they would increase traffic on alternative routes and cause major inconveniences to our citizens. Raised medians of any significant lengths would substantially limit use of intersecting streets and driveways, and thereby most certainly will place significant burdens on our residents and business owners. The four quadrant gates cost approximately $250,000 per crossing, and would be too expensive to install. Also, it should be noted that the railroad has recently denied the installation of the four-quadrant gate measure at one of our crossings since it could potentially trap motorists on the crossing. Of the aforementioned supplementary devices, the photo enforcement is the only device currently in use at one of our crossings. However, this system can not feasibly be installed at our other crossings since it costs several times more than the wayside automated train and is more costly to operate. Furthermore, even though the system has reduced gate violations, we are more comfortable providing some type of audible warning for our motorists.

I strongly believe that the exclusion of the wayside automated train horns as one of the approved supplemental safety measure eliminates a proven, cost-effective means of mitigating community noise impacts without compromising grade crossing safety. Therefore, I again strongly urge you to approve the wayside automated train horns as a supplemental measure.

Yours truly,

Ted Tedesco
Mayor